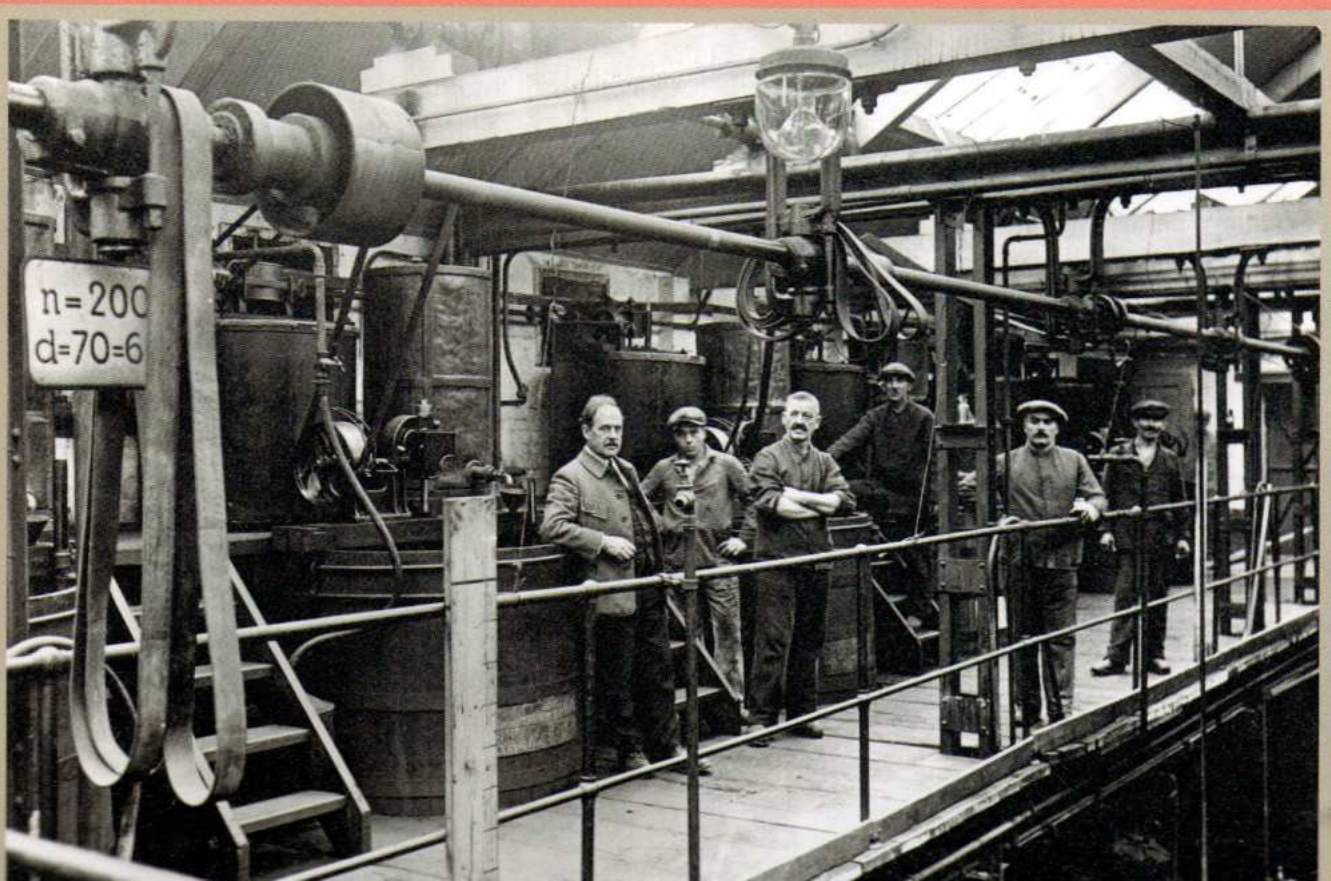
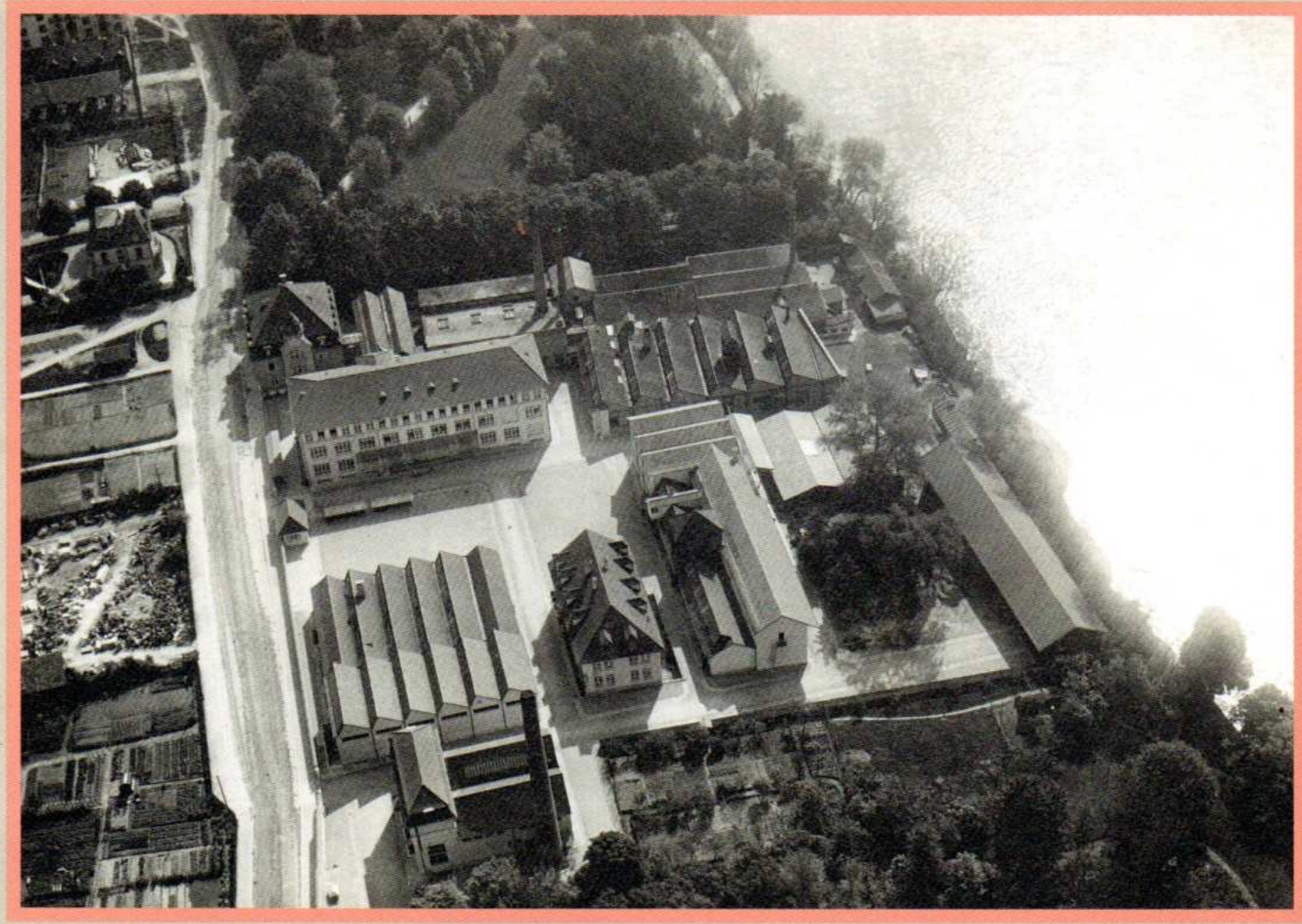
Roche
a legacy of commitment

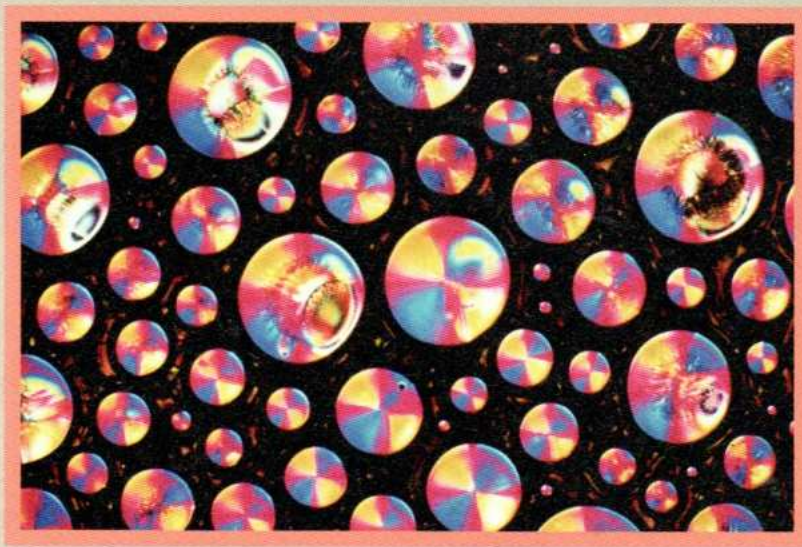
Quick international expansion was a hallmark of the young company's strategy. Before World War I, it already had its own affiliates in ten countries on three continents, among them in New York, St. Petersburg and Yokohama.



Fritz Hoffmann-La Roche (1868-1920) already was a businessman with international experience when he decided at the age of 28 to set up his own enterprise. The impressions he collected while being employed in London and Hamburg – he witnessed the cholera outbreak in the hanseatic German city in 1892 – reinforced his wish to venture into the field of manufacturing pharmaceuticals that were standardised in dosage and effect. He first set up shop with a partner who was paid off already in 1896. Therefore, on 1st of October 1896 the company F. Hoffmann-La Roche & Co. was initiated which already operated affiliates in Switzerland, Germany and Italy.

The easily accessible technology of extraction chemistry long remained the means of choice for producing active ingredients. The fact that Roche did not focus on synthetic chemistry first was seen as a handicap in Basel with its dominating dyestuffs industry. However, due to this experience Roche managed earlier than other companies to make use of novel technologies for advancing medicine.

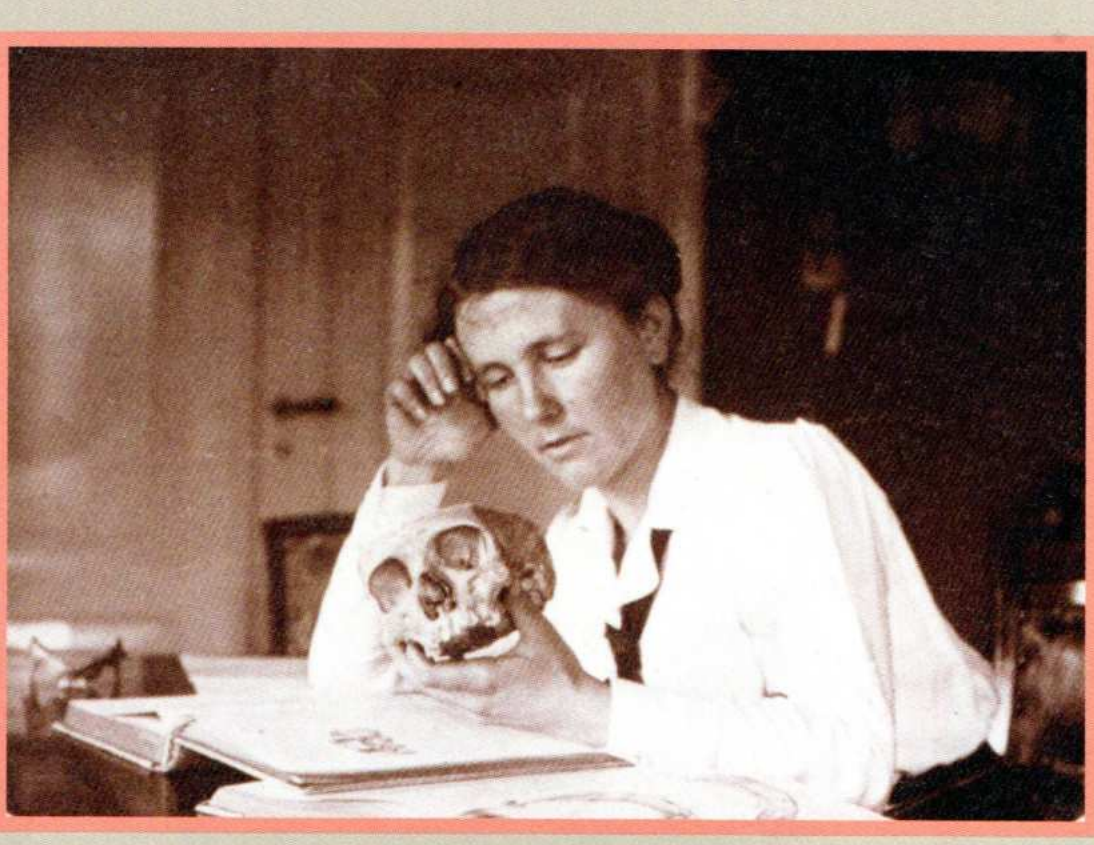




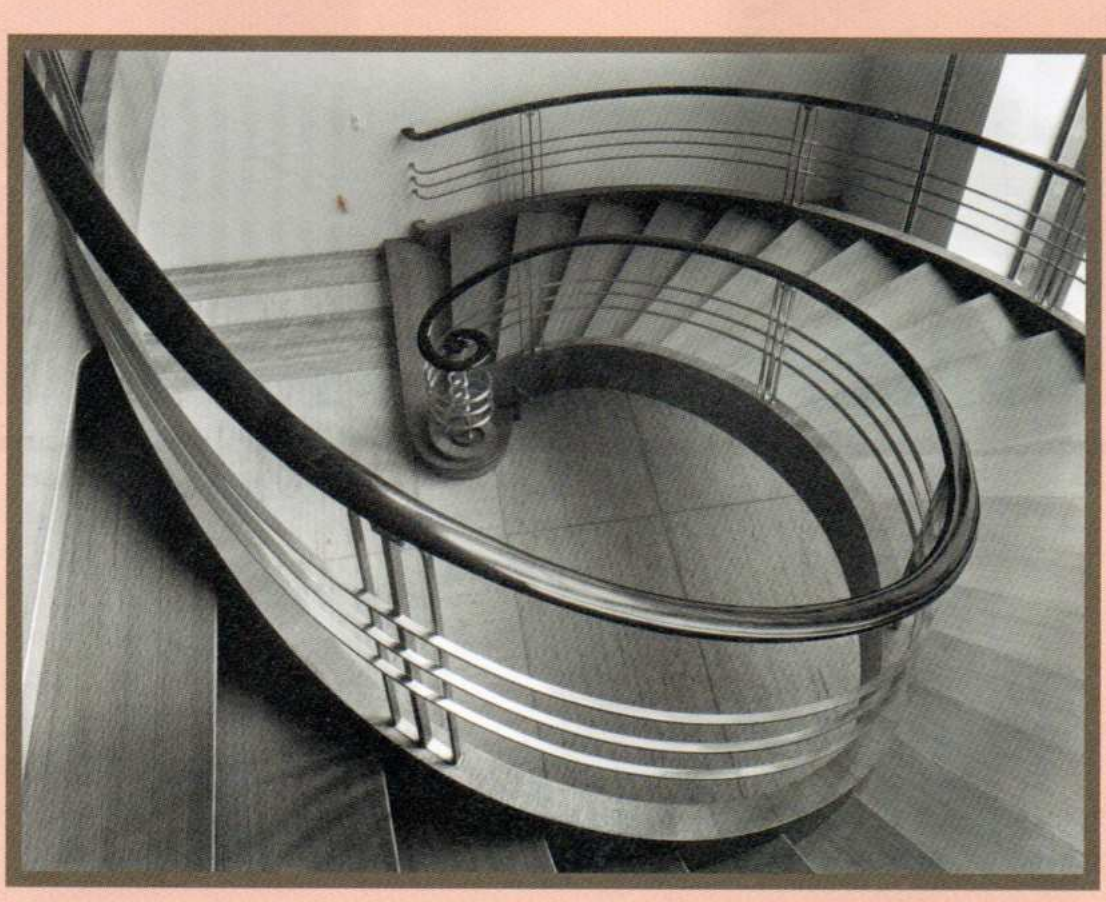
The photograph shows vitamin C crystals under polarized light. Thanks to a collaboration with Tadeusz Reichstein, Roche was the first company which achieved to produce vitamin C in industrial quantities in 1934. Otto Isler from Roche managed the total synthesis of vitamin A in 1946 which also resulted in a broad variety of pharmaceuticals for dermatology and oncology.

Roche was ill prepared for World War I: the embargo policies of the belligerent nations and the October revolution in Russia 1917 posed an existential threat to the business. For continuing to deliver to all countries, the site in Basel had to be expanded which proved to be costly. Fritz Hoffmann was forced to convert his business into a limited stock company under the wings of a bank. He passed away shortly afterwards in March 1920.

Emil Christoph Barell, a chemical scientist, was hired by Fritz Hoffmann already in 1896 and soon became his wingman. Barell became general director of the group in 1920 and eventually also President of the Board of Directors in 1937. Considered one of the inventors of the modern pharmaceutical industry, he brought Roche back on track and turned it into a scientific powerhouse.



Already under Fritz Hoffmann-La Roche the staff at Roche was cosmopolitan and neither nationality nor religion played any role. Under Emil Barell, also women could rise to leadership positions. Of the many female leaders who made their career from the 1920s, our photograph shows Dr. Hilde Pfaltz, a chemist and medical doctor who revolutionized Roche's pharmacology department from the 1930s.



The origins of Roche's commitment to the fine arts go back to Emil Barell. For the new administrative building he had a competition organized which led to the first artwork in Roche's collection: the design by Niklaus Stoecklin shows medicinal plants which all have been used in early Roche products. Roche's art collections all over the world today count many thousands of artworks. They are embedded in the daily routine of the people working at Roche and continue to inspire and trigger discussions.

Under Emil Barell, trailblazing designers created modern printed matter in the latest styles and as soon as budgets allowed new buildings were commissioned. The eminent architect Otto Rudolf Salvisberg was hired and this master of functionality created a new architectural identity for Roche which still serves as an inspiration today. This is nowhere more evident than in the swung staircases whose paragon can be admired in Roche's main administration building 21 in Basel.

After Fritz Hoffmann's death, his son Emanuel Hoffmann started working at Roche. He married Maja Stehlin in 1921 but passed away already in 1932 due to a car accident. Maja Hoffmann-Stehlin was left behind with her two kids Vera and Lukas and a stock portfolio of Roche which she enlarged skilfully until after the II. World War to 50.1% of the votes. Consequently, her influence in the company rose while she identified architecture and the fine arts as her specific field of interest. In 1934 she married Paul Sacher, a conductor from Basel.

For investigating the novel fields of molecular biology and immunology, Roche founded two fully independent research institutes in the late 1960s: the "Roche Institute for Molecular Biology" in Nutley and the "Basel Institute for Immunology". In Nutley (the photo shows the foundation ceremony of the institute), Sidney Pestka managed to produce pure interferon-alpha. Subsequently, Roche looked into cooperating with the newly founded Genentech and from 1980 the two companies jointly developed the manufacturing process for the product.

United States. Roche survived World War II well. The emigration of many Jewish scientists from Europe was systematically supported and they were hired by Roche Nutley (New Jersey) which quickly grew to be the center of the Roche Group. It was here where Leo Sternbach managed to synthesize chlordiazepoxid (Librium) and diazepam (Valium) by the late 1950s, the first two benzodiazepine tranquilizers. The enormous success of these and other products allowed Roche to enlarge its research and venture into new therapeutic areas.

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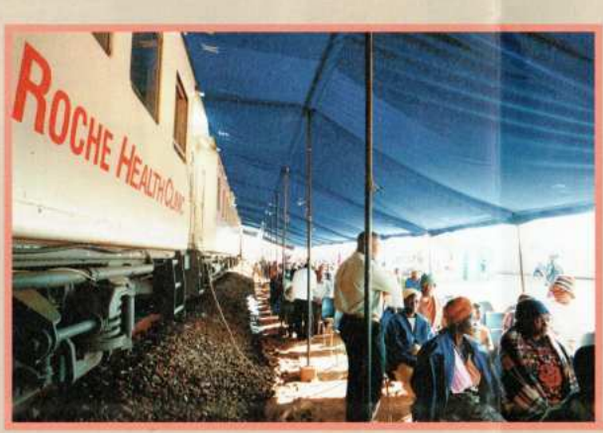
The "Basel Institute for Immunology" was a key player in developing modern bio pharmacy. The institute's Niels Kaj Jerne and Georges Köhler received together with César Milstein the 1984 Nobel Prize for their share in developing the hybridoma technology for manufacturing monoclonal antibodies. Susumu Tonegawa received the Nobel Prize 1987 for the insights he had gained at the institute into the diversity of monoclonal antibodies.

The systematic reinforcement of Roche's diagnostics department started in the late 1960s by venturing into apparatus engineering and electronics. Many acquisitions allowed to build up know-how in the field until the first in-house developed in-vitro-analyzer Cobas Bio was introduced in 1979 (COmprehensive Bio-Analytical System).

Maja Sacher (formerly Maja Hoffmann, née Stehlin) asked her husband Paul to take care of her interests by becoming a member of Roche's Board of Directors in 1937. In addition to the fine arts, music started playing an important role at Roche from then on – so much so that world-famous musicians would play before or during conferences and social events at the company. The Paul Sacher Foundation today is one of the world's centers for research in contemporary music. Roche honours this tradition with several projects of which the biannual commission of a new piece of music from the world's most notable composers – called "Roche Commissions" – is the undisputed highlight.



Roche supports and organises many humanitarian projects which partially also encompass the active participation of employees. One of them is the "Roche Children's Walk" which takes place yearly, a competitive race for which the employees can have themselves sponsored by their colleagues. The profits are donated to healthcare projects for children in need all over the world. One of Roche's longest running humanitarian engagements is its support for the "clinic on wheels" Transnet Phelophepa which brings healthcare services to remote regions in South Africa via two trains – a project which has been supported by Roche since 1994.

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Lukas Hoffmann, expert and activist in environmental protection, sat on Roche's Board of Directors from 1953 until 1996 and made sure that such concerns were taken seriously. Not only was he one of the founders of the WWF, he also set up Europe's largest bird sanctuary in Camargue. When Roche started constructing the world's largest vitamin A-factory in Sisseln near Basel, the company saw itself confronted with requests regarding environmental protection. For the first time, a comprehensive concept including air monitoring and wastewater treatment was implemented. The Seveso incident in 1976 set off a complete renewal of the safety culture at Roche which led to the introduction of group-wide safety standards in 1980.

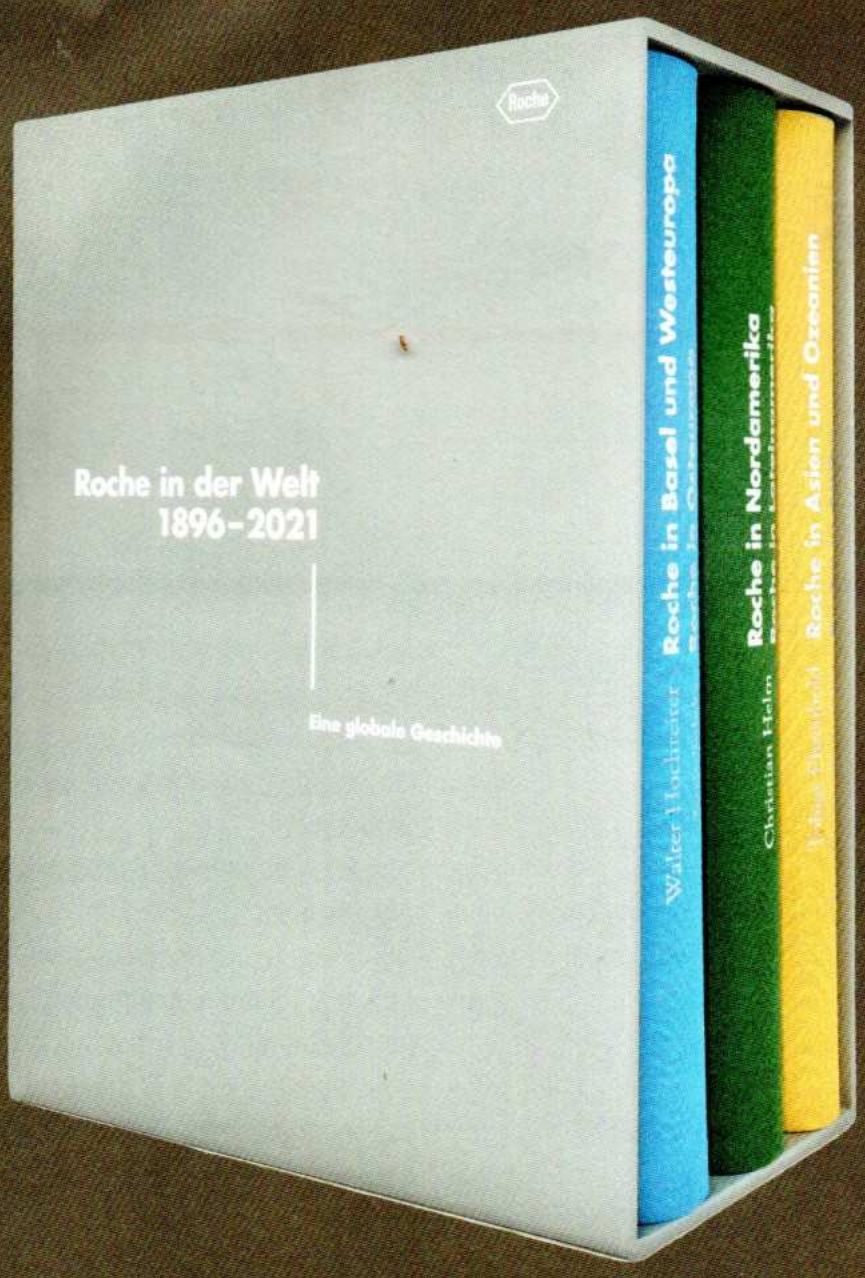
Roche acquired the Corange Group and with it Boehringer Mannheim in 1998. The company thus crucially fortified its position in diagnostics. Members of the Boehringer family already worked at Roche under Fritz Hoffmann. These close relationships led to a cooperation in the field of quinine from the 1920s. The company emerged out of a drugstore in Stuttgart: Christian Friedrich Boehringer founded an attached factory in 1817. Because of space constraints, his son Christoph Heinrich moved to Mannheim in 1872. After his death in 1882 the management was taken over by his son Ernst who was only 22 years old – he invited the chemist Friedrich Engelhorn to join the business as a partner. Ernst passed away already in 1892, his brother Albert had founded his own tartaric acid factory in Ingelheim in 1885. Thus the management of the business remained with the Engelhorn family until it was taken over by Roche. The start of enzyme research by the brilliant Hans Ulrich Bergmeyer after World War II allowed the company to venture into diagnostics and biotechnology.

Syntex emerged from a cooperation of Russell E. Marker of Penn State University with Mexican chemists in Mexico-City in 1944. Marker had experimented with extracts from yams root and managed to synthesize steroid hormones from them. He left the business shortly after its foundation, upon which George Rosenkranz took over the management. Amongst others, he hired Carl Djerassi and the young team jointly developed synthesis processes for cortisone, progesterone and norethisterone, the most effective oral progesterone which subsequently was used in most oral contraceptives. With Syntex, Roche acquired not only a promising pipeline in 1994, but also its legendary Palo Alto research center.

Genentech

Herbert Boyer, pioneer in recombinant DNA technology and professor for biochemistry of the University of California, was contacted in 1976 by Robert Swanson, a venture capital manager. Swanson suggested establishing a company which would make use of the novel technology for manufacturing processes. On 7th of April 1976 Genentech (GENetic ENgineering TECHnology) was duly founded in San Francisco. Roche entered talks with the company in 1978 as it looked for help in the development of a production process for interferon-alpha. The first cooperation agreement was signed in 1980. Roche eventually took over 60% of the company stock in 1990 and – following the trailblazing success of Genentech's monoclonal antibodies in oncology – fully integrated the company in 2009, shifting its US headquarters from Nutley (NJ) to San Francisco.

Chugai was founded by Juzo Ueno in Tokyo in 1925. The company started by distributing imported pharmaceuticals and eventually commenced the production of over-the-counter drugs for which a factory in Takada was erected in 1938. The son-in-law of the founder, Kimio Ueno, focused Chugai from 1966 on research and from the 1980s on biotechnology. With Osamu Nagayama – the husband of a granddaughter of the company founder – the third family member became responsible for the management in 1992. In the late 1990s, he was looking for a global strategic partner which he found in Roche. Subsequently, Roche took over 50.1% of Chugai's shares in 2002 and merged its own Japanese pharma business with the company.



Roche had the history of the company investigated in detail by independent historians. "Roche in the World – 1896–2021" is a richly illustrated regional history which examines transparently the behavior of the company in the single markets it is and has been active in.

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